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More than 200,000 parents receive "P" pins

by Master Sgt. Scott Elliott, Air Force Print News

WASHINGTON — Your Guardians of Freedom, the Air Force's grass-roots outreach information and recognition program, has touched the lives of more than 200,000 parents of airmen, a Pentagon official has announced.

The program began in 2002 as a way for Air Force leaders to personally recognize the employers of reservists and guardsmen who were called to active duty to support operations Noble Eagle and Enduring Freedom. Employers who were nominated by their airmen employees received lapel pins emblazoned with the Air Force logo and the letter "E," and a personal letter signed by the Air Force's senior leaders.

The recognition program expanded in May to include parents. Nominated parents received a letter and lapel pin with the letter "P." All active-duty, Air National Guard and Reserve airmen may participate in the program, officials said.

About 110,000 of the nearly 590,000 uniformed airmen have nominated their parents for recognition, according to Brig. Gen. Ed Tonini, program director.

"That's a huge number," he said. "We've gotten an exceptional reaction to the program from the individual airmen and incredibly emotional responses from their parents when they've received their letters and pins."

The general said the program was so well received in its first few days that technical overload initially hampered the project.

"There was such an onslaught of people signing up, so we had some problems," he said. "We jammed the Web site to where it was virtually impossible to get in."

The program also endured a short-lived identity problem, where some airmen mistakenly thought the program was a fraud because of its dot-com Web address.

"We are 'non-standard' in many ways," Tonini said. "The standard Web sites people in the military are used to dealing with for official business is dot-mil, and we're dot-com. A lot of people thought this was a hoax, so we had to throw water on that fire quickly. This program has both the endorsement and full support of the secretary and chief of staff."

Tonini brought a network administrator, Senior Master Sgt. Jack Gruber from the California ANG, to his team to work out the technical issues, and it has been smoother sailing ever since, he said. Gruber's responsibilities can be really daunting; the site was, for a time, one of the 300 busiest Web sites in the world.

"The site has had more than 29 million hits," Tonini said. "That's pretty staggering. We're working with new technology — we're one of the first Air Force sites to use 'dot-net,' which is an Internet operating system that is very leading-edge."

A team of six people works the program, managing the technology and "customer service" liaison between the airmen who request pins and the parents who receive them — as well as the thousands of letters and pins sent to employers.

The program will soon inform family members, employers and community leaders during times of military deployment, Tonini said.

"The overall YGOF program will be tied to air and space expeditionary force deployment schedules," he said.

"When people are scheduled to deploy, we will press very hard to make sure they have the communications and outreach support they need in order to be successful.

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“In its broadest terms, it’s an outreach program,” Tonini said. “The message we give is, we consider each of the constituencies as our partners. We can’t do our job without their support. They are full partners in the global war on terror.”

The work is important because without support from the home front, deployed airmen face a domino effect of issues that may lead to those airmen separating from the service, Tonini said.

“The program is working and it does what we were looking for it to do,” Tonini said. “We know there are parents out there who proudly wear the pin to church, the store or meetings, and every other time they have an opportunity to brag on their son or daughter. That represents a swelling support for the work of the Air Force all over the world.”

Airmen may request up to two parent pins and letters to be send to either their parents or people they view as parental figures, Tonini said. To participate in the program, visit www.yourguardiansoffreedom.com.

“Everyone has someone they want to recognize,” he said. “The person who gets the pin will feel an amazing attachment to the work you do.” @